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SUBJECT: GSE ARRESTS 27 WOMEN FOR PRAYING

11. (SBU) The Eritrean government (GSE) arrested 27 women praying together in Asmara on December 6, according to multiple embassy sources (Note: although numerous media outlets report 30 arrests, local sources contend it to be 27. End Note). The women were members of the Faith Mission Church, a non-approved religious group with roots in the American Methodist tradition. Those arrested were between the ages of 45 and 70. Police arrested the women, who met each Sunday in a different house to worship, after a neighbor called to alert authorities that the women were praying. The women were taken to Police Station #1 in Asmara (across the street from the British Embassy) where they are currently being held. The women are given water but no food, according to a close embassy source. Family members must bring food to the women during visits. Three of the women suffer from diabetes, and two from hypertension; the women do not receive medical attention while in prison. Minister of Information Ali Abdu denied the allegations in a Reuters interview on December 10, stating he had not heard of the incident and then adding "I'm sure they were committing a crime."

12. (SBU) The GSE recognizes only four religious groups in Eritrea: Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim, and Lutheran. Faith Mission Church is one of the four "compliant" religious groups, organizations that applied for recognition in 2002 as official religious groups but havenot yet been approved. The other three groups are the Mehrete Yesus Evangelical Church, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, and the Baha'i Faith. The status of the four compliant groups is uncertain. While many members practice their faith somewhat openly, the government arbitrarily arrests its members.

13. (SBU) The president of the Faith Mission Church in Asmara complained to the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) on Monday December 7, pointing out the fact that Faith Mission had completed all the proper paperwork in 2002 and is not an illegal organization. The ORA was reportedly shocked to hear that members of Faith Mission had been arrested and told the president that the office would coordinate with the police to secure the members' release. The ORA has not been in touch with Faith Mission since.
McMullen